

“Call His Name Jesus” (Matthew 1:18-25)
Fourth Sunday in Advent, December 22nd, 2013
Pastor Espinosa

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the coming King, the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. And the angel of the Lord came to Joseph and said, ***“call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”*** (Matthew 1:21) What a great Scripture to receive before Christmas dear Christians! It reminds us of the *real* gift this Christmas. Indeed, there is no Christmas without the forgiveness of sins. Where this Scripture in St. Matthew’s Gospel says that Jesus will “save” his people, the simple and yet powerful word “save” means “to rescue and to bring safely.” Putting it all together, the Christmas gift that we anticipate celebrating in just a few days is that Jesus rescues you and brings you safely from your sins. That’s the gift.

But so often we miss the gift for so many other things. When my dad was a little boy during the Great Depression, my grandparents Alfonso and Rita could not even afford a Christmas tree. My dad told me that he remembered a Christmas when they brought a tumble weed into their house and did their very best to decorate it. My dad said that they really didn’t get Christmas gifts like children are accustomed to receiving today. That decade before World War II was a time in which children were happy to play a good game of “kick the can” so that if one had access to a quality used can, *now* you had reason to be happy!

We are a little bolder these days and perhaps expect a little more. Compared to my dad, I certainly expected much more than a used can. I remember being pretty excited about those Christmas catalogs from J.C. Penny, Sears, and Montgomery Ward. I remember circling toys I wanted. It was like having direct access to Santa’s workshop. I knew my mom would become aware and I often received some of those gifts. Going online has taken all of this to another level and it is easy to sense almost an air of entitlement: this is what we do in the U.S. and in America *loving* parents get their kids presents. It’s what we expect. Our children have been well trained. But what are they anticipating this Christmas? Are we teaching them to celebrate what is taught in Matthew 1:21 or something else?

Now that I’m all grown up, I am still guilty this year of knowing about my gift ahead of time. In fact – and even worse – I’m already enjoying it: Traci got me a beautifully framed print of the Lord’s Supper depicting what is probably a more accurate account of the middle-eastern couches used at meals. My wife worked with me to allow ourselves to enjoy this during the Advent season, but this should not come at the expense of losing focus on the real gift we celebrate. Others might have a more difficult time remembering what is really important as they anticipate receiving one of the new Xbox Ones which as of December 19th have sold over

two million units at \$500.00 a pop. Times have changed since my dad's days of tumble weed Christmas "trees"!

I mention it because when you put the seemingly simple Christmas gift we anticipate celebrating alongside the phenomenal bells and whistles of those Christmas gifts that excite people, it is easy to get the feeling that folks aren't paying much attention to the real and lasting gift.

But is being distracted by the material stuff really the reason for our under-valuing the real gift of Christmas? Maybe to an extent, but perhaps another reason is that in spite of its religious import and biblical proclamation, the real gift described in Matthew chapter 1 is just a little too *ordinary*. Someone will instantly object: our Gospel today proclaims the virgin conception and birth. This is a miracle, so that it is anything *but* plain. But last Wednesday night Pastor Mueller brought out the fact that the prophecy of Immanuel is not merely or automatically Gospel, but for some, it is a prophecy of judgment.

It is a prophecy of judgment also against the terrible unbelief that marks our time when in spite of the miracle of Christ's conception and birth, we just see too much of the ordinary, the plain, and the mundane in the Christmas story. I sat back to really look at the words used in this very familiar Scripture. There are words like "birth," "mother," "shame," "divorce," "child," "conceived," "son," "name," "people," "sins,"...these are every-day-life words. What is so spectacular and stimulating about these? In fact, what is perhaps the most ordinary thing about this text is that the Messiah is given a name. Again in our piety we are driven to object to my characterization of Jesus has humdrum: "but this name is above all other names! Haven't you read and heard Philippians 2 that at *this* name every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord?! *This* name *is* different! This name is about our being rescued and to be brought safely from the curse of sin!" But this name is also in many ways ordinary.

How many "Joshua's" do you know? How many people have you met, especially from the Hispanic culture, named "Jesus"? And the theological fact is that this name "is in the first instance an expression of [Christ's] humanity." (*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Volume III:287). That is, the name of the Savior makes him human and what is so special about that? The name is tracked as a human life is tracked: this man with a name like other men with names was born like other men and he died, and all of us die. That's what people experience. That's common, that's typical, and that's mundane. The name means that we have a historical record of another man. "Welcome to the club Jesus. You are one among us and when we look at our lives, frankly this is the reason we get so inundated with stimuli...we are actually trying to forget about the ordinary, the boring, the mundane, and the every-day. There is nothing special

in this.” In a world where people are still starving for food, in our culture it is almost an unforgivable sin to feel bored. Shame, shame on us! Everyone is born, everyone is given a name, everyone lives (for a little while) and everyone dies. In this respect, just what is so special about this real Christmas gift when it just reminds us of the ordinary and what is typical?

This is why while the announcement of Immanuel/God with us is good news for some; it is painfully irrelevant news for others. So while the name of Jesus brings forgiveness for some through faith, it also brings judgment to others who view it as an insignificant holiday that is so ordinary that it must be prettied up and spiced up with reindeer, mistletoe, Santa-Claus, snowmen, and eggnog. Oh I know I sound like Ebenezer himself (bah hum-bug and all of that), but it is true: we struggle to break out of the ordinary reaction we have to the seemingly ordinary gift that is the real gift of Christmas.

This situation makes us like Joseph, we aren’t taking into consideration all of the facts: we just go by appearances. And by appearances, Joseph being a just man (a man truly justified and sanctified) – but nevertheless responding to the plain facts as far as he could perceive them – resolved to divorce Mary. Even the first Christmas at first glance merely gave the impression of man’s weakness and sin: there is nothing special here, just another shameful example of adultery. But before Joseph could act in accord with his limited and ordinary view, God sent His Word to Joseph: ***“Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”*** (Matthew 1:20-21)

The Word of the Lord is also given to you! Fear not! Don’t assume the ordinary, don’t assume the mundane! Indeed sometimes we relegate the miraculous and the glorious to the ordinary because we just think that we are stuck in our ordinary and typical sin. It binds us and we can feel trapped in the basic – and usual – human emotions that accompany our sin. How many of us right now are living with guilt for what we’ve done or have left undone; how many of us right now are living with shame with this cloud over us that says, “There is something wrong with me; I’m not right.”?! How many of us right now live with fear or anger: fear for what we cannot control and anger for what we cannot have? And how many of us are desperate for love right now; feeling as if our normal human experience – riddled in sin – leaves us lonely and longing to be loved? And these things seem so overwhelmingly normal and usual that when we hear about the real Christmas gift that we will soon celebrate, it somehow falls on deaf ears. What is so special about a Savior when I am just stuck in my sin?

But just as the Lord opened Joseph’s ears to hear the voice of the angel, He now opens your ears to hear His Word from another messenger today. Hear this Christian, hear this: the

Name of Jesus is also a Name that puts all other gifts into perspective: the framed print on my wall and all of the Xbox Ones will eventually turn to dust, but this gift, this Jesus that we are about to celebrate for Christmas has come to save you, to rescue you, and to bring you safely from your sins. The fact is that the real Christmas gift means that you are no longer stuck in your sins. This Jesus...

1. Was raised from the dead (Acts 3:15).
2. Was made Messiah and is Lord of the whole world.
3. Is the Judge of all men, but since He bore God's wrath for you on the cross, you are through faith in Him no longer condemned.
4. Was declared by angels.
5. Has done something about the guilt, the shame, the fear, the anger, and the need to be love; this Jesus who is God with us – not merely among us/in our midst, but God *with us* – *has come so that our mundane ordinariness would be invaded by His miraculous and glorious salvation.*

After Joseph received the revelation that Jesus had come to save his people from their sins, by the grace of God he acted on God's Word! Through faith we do to! Our Gospel text at verses 24-25 states: ***"he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus."*** (Matthew 1:24-25)

Jesus comes to rescue and bring you safely from your sins so that you have already crossed from death to life; from being condemned to being declared righteous in the sight of God; from being overwhelmed by sin to having your sin overwhelmed by Jesus' blood; from being without love to being loved fully by God on account of Jesus; from being able to do nothing with your guilt and shame to having Jesus putting that guilt and shame on Himself nailing it to His cross; from having fear and anger fill your soul to having peace with God fill your soul, and now -- by the grace of God -- you act on God's Word.

Though your sin, the world and the evil one continue to shout and accuse the Gospel and the Name of Jesus: "ordinary, mundane, nothing special!" You refuse to go along with it! We say, "get behind me Satan!" We are rather sticking to the Gospel and we act on it: and we do this when we live in our baptism into Jesus, daily confessing our sin and turning from it; and daily confessing our forgiveness and walking in it; we act on it when we come to Church to receive the body and blood of Jesus, so that there is never any doubt that we remain in the forgiveness of sins; and we act on it when we refuse to allow this Gospel and Church to be

counted among the ordinary things. We reject that proposition! Instead, I too will call His Name Jesus and live in what is most important:

knowing that Christmas is about the forgiveness of sins and with this singular gift that clears my conscience, I will now treat the Name of Jesus and His gifts to me not as ordinary but as ***holy***...and when it comes to the holy things, there is nothing mundane or boring about them!

Jesus with His gifts of Word and Sacrament give life, real life, eternal life; life that knows that the real gift of Christmas is better than anything else and that this gift of Jesus is already yours! Let's be clear on that and know therefore that we are after-all ready for Christmas and with all joy and gladness we can and do say, "Come Lord Jesus!"